

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



GRINGOTTS

Their plans were made, their preparations complete; in the smallest bedroom a single long, coarse black hair (plucked from the sweater Hermione had been wearing at Malfoy Manor) lay curled in a small glass phial on the mantelpiece.

“And you’ll be using her actual wand,” said Harry, nodding toward the walnut wand, “so I reckon you’ll be pretty convincing.”

Hermione looked frightened that the wand might sting or bite her as she picked it up.

“I hate this thing,” she said in a low voice. “I really hate it. It feels all wrong, it doesn’t work properly for me. . . . It’s like a bit of *her*.”

Harry could not help but remember how Hermione had dismissed his loathing of the blackthorn wand, insisting that he was imagining things when it did not work as well as his own, telling him to simply practice. He chose not to repeat her own advice back to her, however; the eve of their attempted assault on Gringotts felt like the wrong moment to antagonize her.

“It’ll probably help you get in character, though,” said Ron. “Think what that wand’s done!”

“But that’s my point!” said Hermione. “This is the wand that tortured Neville’s mum and dad, and who knows how many other people? This is the wand that killed Sirius!”

Harry had not thought of that: He looked down at the wand and was visited by a brutal urge to snap it, to slice it in half with Gryffindor’s sword, which was propped against the wall beside him.

“I miss *my* wand,” Hermione said miserably. “I wish Mr. Ollivander could have made me another one too.”

Mr. Ollivander had sent Luna a new wand that morning. She was out on the back lawn at that moment, testing its capabilities in the late afternoon sun. Dean, who had lost his wand to the Snatchers, was watching rather gloomily.

Harry looked down at the hawthorn wand that had once belonged to Draco Malfoy. He had been surprised, but pleased, to discover that it worked for him at least as well as Hermione’s had done. Remembering what Ollivander had told them of the secret workings of wands, Harry thought he knew what Hermione’s problem was: She had not won the walnut wand’s allegiance by taking it personally from Bellatrix.

The door of the bedroom opened and Griphook entered. Harry reached instinctively for the hilt of the sword and drew it close to him, but regretted his action at once: He could tell that the goblin had noticed. Seeking to gloss over the sticky moment, he said, “We’ve just been checking the last-minute stuff, Griphook. We’ve told Bill and Fleur we’re leaving tomorrow, and we’ve told them not to get up to see us off.”

They had been firm on this point, because Hermione would need to transform into Bellatrix before they left, and the less that Bill and Fleur knew or suspected about what they were about to do, the better. They had also explained that they would not be returning. As they had lost Perkins’s old tent on the night that the Snatchers caught them, Bill had lent them another one. It was now packed inside the beaded bag, which, Harry was impressed to learn, Hermione had protected from the Snatchers by the simple expedient of stuffing it down her sock.

Though he would miss Bill, Fleur, Luna, and Dean, not to mention the

home comforts they had enjoyed over the last few weeks, Harry was looking forward to escaping the confinement of Shell Cottage. He was tired of trying to make sure that they were not overheard, tired of being shut in the tiny, dark bedroom. Most of all, he longed to be rid of Griphook. However, precisely how and when they were to part from the goblin without handing over Gryffindor's sword remained a question to which Harry had no answer. It had been impossible to decide how they were going to do it, because the goblin rarely left Harry, Ron, and Hermione alone together for more than five minutes at a time: "He could give my mother lessons," growled Ron, as the goblin's long fingers kept appearing around the edges of doors. With Bill's warning in mind, Harry could not help suspecting that Griphook was on the watch for possible skulduggery. Hermione disapproved so heartily of the planned double-cross that Harry had given up attempting to pick her brains on how best to do it; Ron, on the rare occasions that they had been able to snatch a few Griphook-free moments, had come up with nothing better than "We'll just have to wing it, mate."

Harry slept badly that night. Lying awake in the early hours, he thought back to the way he had felt the night before they had infiltrated the Ministry of Magic and remembered a determination, almost an excitement. Now he was experiencing jolts of anxiety, nagging doubts: He could not shake off the fear that it was all going to go wrong. He kept telling himself that their plan was good, that Griphook knew what they were facing, that they were well-prepared for all the difficulties they were likely to encounter, yet still he felt uneasy. Once or twice he heard Ron stir and was sure that he too was awake, but they were sharing the sitting room with Dean, so Harry did not speak.

It was a relief when six o'clock arrived and they could slip out of their sleeping bags, dress in the semidarkness, then creep out into the garden, where they were to meet Hermione and Griphook. The dawn was chilly, but there was little wind now that it was May. Harry looked up at the stars still glimmering palely in the dark sky and listened to the sea washing backward and forward against the cliff: He was going to miss the sound.

Small green shoots were forcing their way up through the red earth of Dobby's grave now; in a year's time the mound would be covered in flowers.

The white stone that bore the elf's name had already acquired a weathered look. He realized now that they could hardly have laid Dobby to rest in a more beautiful place, but Harry ached with sadness to think of leaving him behind. Looking down on the grave, he wondered yet again how the elf had known where to come to rescue them. His fingers moved absentmindedly to the little pouch still strung around his neck, through which he could feel the jagged mirror fragment in which he had been sure he had seen Dumbledore's eye. Then the sound of a door opening made him look around.

Bellatrix Lestrange was striding across the lawn toward them, accompanied by Griphook. As she walked, she was tucking the small, beaded bag into the inside pocket of another set of the old robes they had taken from Grimmauld Place. Though Harry knew perfectly well that it was really Hermione, he could not suppress a shiver of loathing. She was taller than he was, her long black hair rippling down her back, her heavily lidded eyes disdainful as they rested upon him; but then she spoke, and he heard Hermione through Bellatrix's low voice.

"She tasted *disgusting*, worse than Gurdyroots! Okay, Ron, come here so I can do you. . . ."

"Right, but remember, I don't like the beard too long —"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, this isn't about looking handsome —"

"It's not that, it gets in the way! But I liked my nose a bit shorter, try and do it the way you did last time."

Hermione sighed and set to work, muttering under her breath as she transformed various aspects of Ron's appearance. He was to be given a completely fake identity, and they were trusting to the malevolent aura cast by Bellatrix to protect him. Meanwhile Harry and Griphook were to be concealed under the Invisibility Cloak.

"There," said Hermione, "how does he look, Harry?"

It was just possible to discern Ron under his disguise, but only, Harry thought, because he knew him so well. Ron's hair was now long and wavy; he had a thick brown beard and mustache, no freckles, a short, broad nose, and

heavy eyebrows.

“Well, he’s not my type, but he’ll do,” said Harry. “Shall we go, then?”

All three of them glanced back at Shell Cottage, lying dark and silent under the fading stars, then turned and began to walk toward the point, just beyond the boundary wall, where the Fidelius Charm stopped working and they would be able to Disapparate. Once past the gate, Griphook spoke.

“I should climb up now, Harry Potter, I think?”

Harry bent down and the goblin clambered onto his back, his hands linked in front of Harry’s throat. He was not heavy, but Harry disliked the feeling of the goblin and the surprising strength with which he clung on. Hermione pulled the Invisibility Cloak out of the beaded bag and threw it over them both.

“Perfect,” she said, bending down to check Harry’s feet. “I can’t see a thing. Let’s go.”

Harry turned on the spot, with Griphook on his shoulders, concentrating with all his might on the Leaky Cauldron, the inn that was the entrance to Diagon Alley. The goblin clung even tighter as they moved into the compressing darkness, and seconds later Harry’s feet found pavement and he opened his eyes on Charing Cross Road. Muggles bustled past wearing the hangdog expressions of early morning, quite unconscious of the little inn’s existence.

The bar of the Leaky Cauldron was nearly deserted. Tom, the stooped and toothless landlord, was polishing glasses behind the bar counter; a couple of warlocks having a muttered conversation in the far corner glanced at Hermione and drew back into the shadows.

“Madam Lestrangle,” murmured Tom, and as Hermione passed he inclined his head subserviently.

“Good morning,” said Hermione, and as Harry crept past, still carrying Griphook piggyback under the Cloak, he saw Tom look surprised.

“Too polite,” Harry whispered in Hermione’s ear as they passed out of the inn into the tiny backyard. “You need to treat people like they’re scum!”

“Okay, okay!”

Hermione drew out Bellatrix’s wand and tapped a brick in the nondescript wall in front of them. At once the bricks began to whirl and spin: A hole appeared in the middle of them, which grew wider and wider, finally forming an archway onto the narrow cobbled street that was Diagon Alley.

It was quiet, barely time for the shops to open, and there were hardly any shoppers abroad. The crooked, cobbled street was much altered now from the bustling place Harry had visited before his first term at Hogwarts so many years before. More shops than ever were boarded up, though several new establishments dedicated to the Dark Arts had been created since his last visit. Harry’s own face glared down at him from posters plastered over many windows, always captioned with the words UNDESIRABLE NUMBER ONE.

A number of ragged people sat huddled in doorways. He heard them moaning to the few passersby, pleading for gold, insisting that they were really wizards. One man had a bloody bandage over his eye.

As they set off along the street, the beggars glimpsed Hermione. They seemed to melt away before her, drawing hoods over their faces and fleeing as fast as they could. Hermione looked after them curiously, until the man with the bloodied bandage came staggering right across her path.

“My children!” he bellowed, pointing at her. His voice was cracked, high-pitched; he sounded distraught. “Where are my children? What has he done with them? You know, *you know!*”

“I — I really —” stammered Hermione.

The man lunged at her, reaching for her throat: Then, with a bang and a burst of red light he was thrown backward onto the ground, unconscious. Ron stood there, his wand still outstretched and a look of shock visible behind his beard. Faces appeared at the windows on either side of the street, while a little knot of prosperous-looking passersby gathered their robes about them and broke into gentle trots, keen to vacate the scene.

Their entrance into Diagon Alley could hardly have been more conspicuous; for a moment Harry wondered whether it might not be better to

leave now and try to think of a different plan. Before they could move or consult one another, however, they heard a cry from behind them.

“Why, Madam Lestrangle!”

Harry whirled around and Griphook tightened his hold around Harry’s neck: A tall, thin wizard with a crown of bushy gray hair and a long, sharp nose was striding toward them.

“It’s Travers,” hissed the goblin into Harry’s ear, but at that moment Harry could not think who Travers was. Hermione had drawn herself up to her fullest height and said with as much contempt as she could muster:

“And what do you want?”

Travers stopped in his tracks, clearly affronted.

“*He’s another Death Eater!*” breathed Griphook, and Harry sidled sideways to repeat the information into Hermione’s ear.

“I merely sought to greet you,” said Travers coolly, “but if my presence is not welcome . . .”

Harry recognized his voice now; Travers was one of the Death Eaters who had been summoned to Xenophilius’s house.

“No, no, not at all, Travers,” said Hermione quickly, trying to cover up her mistake. “How are you?”

“Well, I confess I am surprised to see you out and about, Bellatrix.”

“Really? Why?” asked Hermione.

“Well,” Travers coughed, “I *heard* that the inhabitants of Malfoy Manor were confined to the house, after the . . . ah . . . *escape*.”

Harry willed Hermione to keep her head. If this was true, and Bellatrix was not supposed to be out in public —

“The Dark Lord forgives those who have served him most faithfully in the past,” said Hermione in a magnificent imitation of Bellatrix’s most contemptuous manner. “Perhaps your credit is not as good with him as mine is, Travers.”

Though the Death Eater looked offended, he also seemed less suspicious. He glanced down at the man Ron had just Stunned.

“How did it offend you?”

“It does not matter, it will not do so again,” said Hermione coolly.

“Some of these wandless can be troublesome,” said Travers. “While they do nothing but beg I have no objection, but one of them actually asked me to plead her case at the Ministry last week. *‘I’m a witch, sir, I’m a witch, let me prove it to you!’*” he said in a squeaky impersonation. “As if I was going to give her my wand — but whose wand,” said Travers curiously, “are you using at the moment, Bellatrix? I heard that your own was —”

“I have my wand here,” said Hermione coldly, holding up Bellatrix’s wand. “I don’t know what rumors you have been listening to, Travers, but you seem sadly misinformed.”

Travers seemed a little taken aback at that, and he turned instead to Ron.

“Who is your friend? I do not recognize him.”

“This is Dragomir Despard,” said Hermione; they had decided that a fictional foreigner was the safest cover for Ron to assume. “He speaks very little English, but he is in sympathy with the Dark Lord’s aims. He has traveled here from Transylvania to see our new regime.”

“Indeed? How do you do, Dragomir?”

“Ow you?” said Ron, holding out his hand.

Travers extended two fingers and shook Ron’s hand as though frightened of dirtying himself.

“So what brings you and your — ah — sympathetic friend to Diagon Alley this early?” asked Travers.

“I need to visit Gringotts,” said Hermione.

“Alas, I also,” said Travers. “Gold, filthy gold! We cannot live without it, yet I confess I deplore the necessity of consorting with our long-fingered friends.”

Harry felt Griphook's clasped hands tighten momentarily around his neck.

"Shall we?" said Travers, gesturing Hermione forward.

Hermione had no choice but to fall into step beside him and head along the crooked, cobbled street toward the place where the snowy-white Gringotts stood towering over the other little shops. Ron sloped along beside them, and Harry and Griphook followed.

A watchful Death Eater was the very last thing they needed, and the worst of it was, with Travers marching at what he believed to be Bellatrix's side, there was no means for Harry to communicate with Hermione or Ron. All too soon they arrived at the foot of the marble steps leading up to the great bronze doors. As Griphook had already warned them, the liveried goblins who usually flanked the entrance had been replaced by two wizards, both of whom were clutching long thin golden rods.

"Ah, Probity Probes," sighed Travers theatrically, "so crude — but effective!"

And he set off up the steps, nodding left and right to the wizards, who raised the golden rods and passed them up and down his body. The Probes, Harry knew, detected spells of concealment and hidden magical objects. Knowing that he had only seconds, Harry pointed Draco's wand at each of the guards in turn and murmured, "*Confundo*" twice. Unnoticed by Travers, who was looking through the bronze doors at the inner hall, each of the guards gave a little start as the spells hit them.

Hermione's long black hair rippled behind her as she climbed the steps.

"One moment, madam," said the guard, raising his Probe.

"But you've just done that!" said Hermione in Bellatrix's commanding, arrogant voice. Travers looked around, eyebrows raised. The guard was confused. He stared down at the thin golden Probe and then at his companion, who said in a slightly dazed voice,

"Yeah, you've just checked them, Marius."

Hermione swept forward, Ron by her side, Harry and Griphook trotting invisibly behind them. Harry glanced back as they crossed the threshold: The

wizards were both scratching their heads.

Two goblins stood before the inner doors, which were made of silver and which carried the poem warning of dire retribution to potential thieves. Harry looked up at it, and all of a sudden a knife-sharp memory came to him: standing on this very spot on the day that he had turned eleven, the most wonderful birthday of his life, and Hagrid standing beside him saying, “*Like I said, yeh’d be mad ter try an’ rob it.*” Gringotts had seemed a place of wonder that day, the enchanted repository of a trove of gold he had never known he possessed, and never for an instant could he have dreamed that he would return to steal. . . . But within seconds they were standing in the vast marble hall of the bank.

The long counter was manned by goblins sitting on high stools, serving the first customers of the day. Hermione, Ron, and Travers headed toward an old goblin who was examining a thick gold coin through an eyeglass. Hermione allowed Travers to step ahead of her on the pretext of explaining features of the hall to Ron.

The goblin tossed the coin he was holding aside, said to nobody in particular, “Leprechaun,” and then greeted Travers, who passed over a tiny golden key, which was examined and given back to him.

Hermione stepped forward.

“Madam Lestrangle!” said the goblin, evidently startled. “Dear me! How — how may I help you today?”

“I wish to enter my vault,” said Hermione.

The old goblin seemed to recoil a little. Harry glanced around. Not only was Travers hanging back, watching, but several other goblins had looked up from their work to stare at Hermione.

“You have . . . identification?” asked the goblin.

“Identification? I — I have never been asked for identification before!” said Hermione.

“*They know!*” whispered Griphook in Harry’s ear. “*They must have been warned there might be an impostor!*”

“Your wand will do, madam,” said the goblin. He held out a slightly trembling hand, and in a dreadful blast of realization Harry knew that the goblins of Gringotts were aware that Bellatrix’s wand had been stolen.

“*Act now, act now,*” whispered Griphook in Harry’s ear, “*the Imperius Curse!*”

Harry raised the hawthorn wand beneath the cloak, pointed it at the old goblin, and whispered, for the first time in his life, “*Imperio!*”

A curious sensation shot down Harry’s arm, a feeling of tingling warmth that seemed to flow from his mind, down the sinews and veins connecting him to the wand and the curse it had just cast. The goblin took Bellatrix’s wand, examined it closely, and then said, “Ah, you have had a new wand made, Madam Lestrangle!”

“What?” said Hermione. “No, no, that’s mine —”

“A new wand?” said Travers, approaching the counter again; still the goblins all around were watching. “But how could you have done, which wandmaker did you use?”

Harry acted without thinking: Pointing his wand at Travers, he muttered, “*Imperio!*” once more.

“Oh yes, I see,” said Travers, looking down at Bellatrix’s wand, “yes, very handsome. And is it working well? I always think wands require a little breaking in, don’t you?”

Hermione looked utterly bewildered, but to Harry’s enormous relief she accepted the bizarre turn of events without comment.

The old goblin behind the counter clapped his hands and a younger goblin approached.

“I shall need the Clankers,” he told the goblin, who dashed away and returned a moment later with a leather bag that seemed to be full of jangling metal, which he handed to his senior. “Good, good! So, if you will follow me, Madam Lestrangle,” said the old goblin, hopping down off his stool and vanishing from sight, “I shall take you to your vault.”

He appeared around the end of the counter, jogging happily toward them, the contents of the leather bag still jingling. Travers was now standing quite still with his mouth hanging wide open. Ron was drawing attention to this odd phenomenon by regarding Travers with confusion.

“Wait — Bogrod!”

Another goblin came scurrying around the counter.

“We have instructions,” he said with a bow to Hermione. “Forgive me, Madam, but there have been special orders regarding the vault of Lestrange.”

He whispered urgently in Bogrod’s ear, but the Imperiused goblin shook him off.

“I am aware of the instructions. Madam Lestrange wishes to visit her vault . . . Very old family . . . old clients . . . This way, please . . .”

And, still clanking, he hurried toward one of the many doors leading off the hall. Harry looked back at Travers, who was still rooted to the spot looking abnormally vacant, and made his decision: With a flick of his wand he made Travers come with them, walking meekly in their wake as they reached the door and passed into the rough stone passageway beyond, which was lit with flaming torches.

“We’re in trouble; they suspect,” said Harry as the door slammed behind them and he pulled off the Invisibility Cloak. Griphook jumped down from his shoulders; neither Travers nor Bogrod showed the slightest surprise at the sudden appearance of Harry Potter in their midst. “They’re Imperiused,” he added, in response to Hermione and Ron’s confused queries about Travers and Bogrod, who were both now standing there looking blank. “I don’t think I did it strongly enough, I don’t know. . . .”

And another memory darted through his mind, of the real Bellatrix Lestrange shrieking at him when he had first tried to use an Unforgivable Curse: “You need to *mean* them, Potter!”

“What do we do?” asked Ron. “Shall we get out now, while we can?”

“If we can,” said Hermione, looking back toward the door into the main hall, beyond which who knew what was happening.

“We’ve got this far, I say we go on,” said Harry.

“Good!” said Griphook. “So, we need Bogrod to control the cart; I no longer have the authority. But there will not be room for the wizard.”

Harry pointed his wand at Travers.

“Imperio!”

The wizard turned and set off along the dark track at a smart pace.

“What are you making him do?”

“Hide,” said Harry as he pointed his wand at Bogrod, who whistled to summon a little cart that came trundling along the tracks toward them out of the darkness. Harry was sure he could hear shouting behind them in the main hall as they all clambered into it, Bogrod in front with Griphook, Harry, Ron, and Hermione crammed together in the back.

With a jerk the cart moved off, gathering speed: They hurtled past Travers, who was wriggling into a crack in the wall, then the cart began twisting and turning through the labyrinthine passages, sloping downward all the time. Harry could not hear anything over the rattling of the cart on the tracks: His hair flew behind him as they swerved between stalactites, flying ever deeper into the earth, but he kept glancing back. They might as well have left enormous footprints behind them; the more he thought about it, the more foolish it seemed to have disguised Hermione as Bellatrix, to have brought along Bellatrix’s wand, when the Death Eaters knew who had stolen it —

They were deeper than Harry had ever penetrated within Gringotts; they took a hairpin bend at speed and saw ahead of them, with seconds to spare, a waterfall pounding over the track. Harry heard Griphook shout, “No!” but there was no braking: They zoomed through it. Water filled Harry’s eyes and mouth: He could not see or breathe: Then, with an awful lurch, the cart flipped over and they were all thrown out of it. Harry heard the cart smash into pieces against the passage wall, heard Hermione shriek something, and felt himself glide back toward the ground as though weightless, landing painlessly on the rocky passage floor.

“C-Cushioning Charm,” Hermione spluttered, as Ron pulled her to her feet,

but to Harry's horror he saw that she was no longer Bellatrix; instead she stood there in overlarge robes, sopping wet and completely herself; Ron was red-haired and beardless again. They were realizing it as they looked at each other, feeling their own faces.

"The Thief's Downfall!" said Griphook, clambering to his feet and looking back at the deluge onto the tracks, which, Harry knew now, had been more than water. "It washes away all enchantment, all magical concealment! They know there are impostors in Gringotts, they have set off defenses against us!"

Harry saw Hermione checking that she still had the beaded bag, and hurriedly thrust his own hand under his jacket to make sure he had not lost the Invisibility Cloak. Then he turned to see Bogrod shaking his head in bewilderment: The Thief's Downfall seemed to have lifted the Imperius Curse.

"We need him," said Griphook, "we cannot enter the vault without a Gringotts goblin. And we need the Clankers!"

"*Imperio!*" Harry said again; his voice echoed through the stone passage as he felt again the sense of heady control that flowed from brain to wand. Bogrod submitted once more to his will, his befuddled expression changing to one of polite indifference, as Ron hurried to pick up the leather bag of metal tools.

"Harry, I think I can hear people coming!" said Hermione, and she pointed Bellatrix's wand at the waterfall and cried, "*Protego!*" They saw the Shield Charm break the flow of enchanted water as it flew up the passageway.

"Good thinking," said Harry. "Lead the way, Griphook!"

"How are we going to get out again?" Ron asked as they hurried on foot into the darkness after the goblin, Bogrod panting in their wake like an old dog.

"Let's worry about that when we have to," said Harry. He was trying to listen: He thought he could hear something clanking and moving around nearby. "Griphook, how much farther?"

"Not far, Harry Potter, not far . . ."

And they turned a corner and saw the thing for which Harry had been prepared, but which still brought all of them to a halt.

A gigantic dragon was tethered to the ground in front of them, barring access to four or five of the deepest vaults in the place. The beast's scales had turned pale and flaky during its long incarceration under the ground; its eyes were milkily pink; both rear legs bore heavy cuffs from which chains led to enormous pegs driven deep into the rocky floor. Its great spiked wings, folded close to its body, would have filled the chamber if it spread them, and when it turned its ugly head toward them, it roared with a noise that made the rock tremble, opened its mouth, and spat a jet of fire that sent them running back up the passageway.

"It is partially blind," panted Griphook, "but even more savage for that. However, we have the means to control it. It has learned what to expect when the Clankers come. Give them to me."

Ron passed the bag to Griphook, and the goblin pulled out a number of small metal instruments that when shaken made a loud, ringing noise like miniature hammers on anvils. Griphook handed them out: Bogrod accepted his meekly.

"You know what to do," Griphook told Harry, Ron, and Hermione. "It will expect pain when it hears the noise: It will retreat, and Bogrod must place his palm upon the door of the vault."

They advanced around the corner again, shaking the Clankers, and the noise echoed off the rocky walls, grossly magnified, so that the inside of Harry's skull seemed to vibrate with the din. The dragon let out another hoarse roar, then retreated. Harry could see it trembling, and as they drew nearer he saw the scars made by vicious slashes across its face, and guessed that it had been taught to fear hot swords when it heard the sound of the Clankers.

"Make him press his hand to the door!" Griphook urged Harry, who turned his wand again upon Bogrod. The old goblin obeyed, pressing his palm to the wood, and the door of the vault melted away to reveal a cavelike opening crammed from floor to ceiling with golden coins and goblets, silver armor, the

skins of strange creatures — some with long spines, others with drooping wings — potions in jeweled flasks, and a skull still wearing a crown.

“Search, fast!” said Harry as they all hurried inside the vault.

He had described Hufflepuff’s cup to Ron and Hermione, but if it was the other, unknown Horcrux that resided in this vault, he did not know what it looked like. He barely had time to glance around, however, before there was a muffled clunk from behind them: The door had reappeared, sealing them inside the vault, and they were plunged into total darkness.

“No matter, Bogrod will be able to release us!” said Griphook as Ron gave a shout of surprise. “Light your wands, can’t you? And hurry, we have very little time!”

“*Lumos!*”

Harry shone his lit wand around the vault: Its beam fell upon glittering jewels; he saw the fake sword of Gryffindor lying on a high shelf amongst a jumble of chains. Ron and Hermione had lit their wands too, and were now examining the piles of objects surrounding them.

“Harry, could this be — ? Aargh!”

Hermione screamed in pain, and Harry turned his wand on her in time to see a jeweled goblet tumbling from her grip. But as it fell, it split, became a shower of goblets, so that a second later, with a great clatter, the floor was covered in identical cups rolling in every direction, the original impossible to discern amongst them.

“It burned me!” moaned Hermione, sucking her blistered fingers.

“They have added Gemino and Flagrante Curses!” said Griphook. “Everything you touch will burn and multiply, but the copies are worthless — and if you continue to handle the treasure, you will eventually be crushed to death by the weight of expanding gold!”

“Okay, don’t touch anything!” said Harry desperately, but even as he said it, Ron accidentally nudged one of the fallen goblets with his foot, and twenty more exploded into being while Ron hopped on the spot, part of his shoe burned away by contact with the hot metal.

“Stand still, don’t move!” said Hermione, clutching at Ron.

“Just look around!” said Harry. “Remember, the cup’s small and gold, it’s got a badger engraved on it, two handles — otherwise see if you can spot Ravenclaw’s symbol anywhere, the eagle —”

They directed their wands into every nook and crevice, turning cautiously on the spot. It was impossible not to brush up against anything; Harry sent a great cascade of fake Galleons onto the ground where they joined the goblets, and now there was scarcely room to place their feet, and the glowing gold blazed with heat, so that the vault felt like a furnace. Harry’s wandlight passed over shields and goblin-made helmets set on shelves rising to the ceiling; higher and higher he raised the beam, until suddenly it found an object that made his heart skip and his hand tremble.

“It’s there, it’s up there!”

Ron and Hermione pointed their wands at it too, so that the little golden cup sparkled in a three-way spotlight: the cup that had belonged to Helga Hufflepuff, which had passed into the possession of Hepzibah Smith, from whom it had been stolen by Tom Riddle.

“And how the hell are we going to get up there without touching anything?” asked Ron.

“*Accio Cup!*” cried Hermione, who had evidently forgotten in her desperation what Griphook had told them during their planning sessions.

“No use, no use!” snarled the goblin.

“Then what do we do?” said Harry, glaring at the goblin. “If you want the sword, Griphook, then you’ll have to help us more than — wait! Can I touch stuff with the sword? Hermione, give it here!”

Hermione fumbled inside her robes, drew out the beaded bag, rummaged for a few seconds, then removed the shining sword. Harry seized it by its rubied hilt and touched the tip of the blade to a silver flagon nearby, which did not multiply.

“If I can just poke the sword through a handle — but how am I going to get up there?”

The shelf on which the cup reposed was out of reach for any of them, even Ron, who was tallest. The heat from the enchanted treasure rose in waves, and sweat ran down Harry's face and back as he struggled to think of a way up to the cup; and then he heard the dragon roar on the other side of the vault door, and the sound of clanking growing louder and louder.

They were truly trapped now: There was no way out except through the door, and a horde of goblins seemed to be approaching on the other side. Harry looked at Ron and Hermione and saw terror in their faces.

"Hermione," said Harry as the clanking grew louder, "I've got to get up there, we've got to get rid of it —"

She raised her wand, pointed it at Harry, and whispered, "*Levicorpus*."

Hoisted into the air by his ankle, Harry hit a suit of armor and replicas burst out of it like white-hot bodies, filling the cramped space. With screams of pain Ron, Hermione, and the two goblins were knocked aside into other objects, which also began to replicate. Half buried in a rising tide of red-hot treasure, they struggled and yelled as Harry thrust the sword through the handle of Hufflepuff's cup, hooking it onto the blade.

"*Impervius!*" screeched Hermione in an attempt to protect herself, Ron, and the goblins from the burning metal.

Then the worst scream yet made Harry look down: Ron and Hermione were waist-deep in treasure, struggling to keep Bogrod from slipping beneath the rising tide, but Griphook had sunk out of sight and nothing but the tips of a few long fingers were left in view.

Harry seized Griphook's fingers and pulled. The blistered goblin emerged by degrees, howling.

"*Liberacorpus!*" yelled Harry, and with a crash he and Griphook landed on the surface of the swelling treasure, and the sword flew out of Harry's hand.

"Get it!" Harry yelled, fighting the pain of the hot metal on his skin, as Griphook clambered onto his shoulders again, determined to avoid the swelling mass of red-hot objects. "Where's the sword? It had the cup on it!"

The clanking on the other side of the door was growing deafening — it was

too late —

“There!”

It was Griphook who had seen it and Griphook who lunged, and in that instant Harry knew that the goblin had never expected them to keep their word. One hand holding tightly to a fistful of Harry’s hair, to make sure he did not fall into the heaving sea of burning gold, Griphook seized the hilt of the sword and swung it high out of Harry’s reach.

The tiny golden cup, skewered by the handle on the sword’s blade, was flung into the air. The goblin still astride him, Harry dived and caught it, and although he could feel it scalding his flesh he did not relinquish it, even while countless Hufflepuff cups burst from his fist, raining down upon him as the entrance of the vault opened up again and he found himself sliding uncontrollably on an expanding avalanche of fiery gold and silver that bore him, Ron, and Hermione into the outer chamber.

Hardly aware of the pain from the burns covering his body, and still borne along on the swell of replicating treasure, Harry shoved the cup into his pocket and reached up to retrieve the sword, but Griphook was gone. Sliding from Harry’s shoulders the moment he could, he had sprinted for cover amongst the surrounding goblins, brandishing the sword and crying, “Thieves! Thieves! Help! Thieves!” He vanished into the midst of the advancing crowd, all of whom were holding daggers and who accepted him without question.

Slipping on the hot metal, Harry struggled to his feet and knew that the only way out was through.

“*Stupefy!*” he bellowed, and Ron and Hermione joined in: Jets of red light flew into the crowd of goblins, and some toppled over, but others advanced, and Harry saw several wizard guards running around the corner.

The tethered dragon let out a roar, and a gush of flame flew over the goblins: The wizards fled, doubled-up, back the way they had come, and inspiration, or madness, came to Harry. Pointing his wand at the thick cuffs chaining the beast to the floor, he yelled, “*Relashio!*”

The cuffs broke open with loud bangs.

“This way!” Harry yelled, and still shooting Stunning Spells at the advancing goblins, he sprinted toward the blind dragon.

“Harry — Harry — what are you doing?” cried Hermione.

“Get up, climb up, come on —”

The dragon had not realized that it was free: Harry’s foot found the crook of its hind leg and he pulled himself up onto its back. The scales were hard as steel; it did not even seem to feel him. He stretched out an arm; Hermione hoisted herself up; Ron climbed on behind them, and a second later the dragon became aware that it was untethered.

With a roar it reared: Harry dug in his knees, clutching as tightly as he could to the jagged scales as the wings opened, knocking the shrieking goblins aside like skittles, and it soared into the air. Harry, Ron, and Hermione, flat on its back, scraped against the ceiling as it dived toward the passage opening, while the pursuing goblins hurled daggers that glanced off its flanks.

“We’ll never get out, it’s too big!” Hermione screamed, but the dragon opened its mouth and belched flame again, blasting the tunnel, whose floors and ceiling cracked and crumbled. By sheer force the dragon clawed and fought its way through. Harry’s eyes were shut tight against the heat and dust: Deafened by the crashing of rock and the dragon’s roars, he could only cling to its back, expecting to be shaken off at any moment; then he heard Hermione yelling, “*Defodio!*”

She was helping the dragon enlarge the passageway, carving out the ceiling as it struggled upward toward the fresher air, away from the shrieking and clanking goblins: Harry and Ron copied her, blasting the ceiling apart with more gouging spells. They passed the underground lake, and the great crawling, snarling beast seemed to sense freedom and space ahead of it, and behind them the passage was full of the dragon’s thrashing, spiked tail, of great lumps of rock, gigantic fractured stalactites, and the clanking of the goblins seemed to be growing more muffled, while ahead, the dragon’s fire kept their progress clear —

And then at last, by the combined force of their spells and the dragon's brute strength, they had blasted their way out of the passage into the marble hallway. Goblins and wizards shrieked and ran for cover, and finally the dragon had room to stretch its wings: Turning its horned head toward the cool outside air it could smell beyond the entrance, it took off, and with Harry, Ron, and Hermione still clinging to its back, it forced its way through the metal doors, leaving them buckled and hanging from their hinges, as it staggered into Diagon Alley and launched itself into the sky.